

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

Title

- I. “The short chapter is called in a superscription ‘the vision of Obadiah.’”¹
 - A. “The name *Obadiah* (which might be merely a description, ‘servant of Jehovah’) occurs as a designation of at least twelve individuals mentioned in the Old Testament.”² See 1 Kings 18.3ff.; 1 Chronicles 3.21; 7.3; 8.38 (=9.44); 9.16; 12.9; 27.19; 2 Chronicles 17.7; 34.12; Ezra 8.9; Nehemiah 10.5; 12.25.
 1. “There is nothing to prove the identity of the prophet with any other bearer of the name.”³
 2. However, some attempt to identify the penman of this short oracle with one of the Old Testament characters bearing this name.
 - a. According to patristic traditions, Obadiah belonged to the tribe of Ephraim and lived during the reign of Ahab (see 1 Kings 18.3ff.).⁴
 - b. “Delitzsch thinks that he may have been the Obadiah mentioned in 2 Chronicles 17.7 as one of the Levites whom Jehoshaphat sent to teach the law in cities of Judah.”⁵
 - c. Rabbinical accounts make him an Edomitish proselyte.⁶
 - d. However, all that can be known of the author is that he bears the name Obadiah, “worshiper of God.”
 - B. Even the form of the name which serves as the title is of uncertain origin.
 1. The Hebrew text of Obadiah 1 has ‘*Obhadhyah*’; cf. ‘*Obhadhyahu*’ in 1 Chronicles 27.19; 2 Chronicles 34.12.
 2. The Greek texts of the Old Testament contain such variations as *Obdiou*, *Abdiou*, *Abdias*, and *Abdia*. It is possible that the title of the work should be written *Abdiah* instead of *Obadiah*.⁷
- II. No other name has been postulated for this oracle; “the name must not necessarily be understood as a later pseudonymous designation of the book, for it is also used by other persons of the Old Testament.”⁸

¹Bentzen, 143.

²Wade, xxxii.

³Farrar, 175.

⁴Davidson, 263.

⁵Farrar, 175.

⁶Keil, 337.

⁷Wade, xxxiii.

⁸Bentzen, 143.

Relation of Obadiah to Other Old Testament Literature

- I. Obadiah imitates the prophecies of Balaam in several passages (compare Numbers 24.21, 18, 19 with Obadiah 4, 18, 19).⁹
 - A. Davidson maintains that Obadiah borrowed from the prophecy of Balaam.¹⁰
 - B. Such similarities do not prove necessarily literary dependence.
 1. Prophetic themes and particular phrases common to Israel's seers may have been known by Obadiah and readily used by him.
 2. The role of the work of the Spirit of God also must be emphasized.
 - a. The word "vision" in verse 1 implies a revelation from God.
 - b. The Lord God spoke to Obadiah, thus the phrase, "we have heard tidings from the Lord" (v. 1).
 - (1) Some have regarded this as a "reference to the community's inheritance of a venerated oracle."¹¹
 - (2) But this can only be assumed to be the case and cannot be known for sure.
- II. Obadiah uses the oracle against Edom recorded in Jeremiah 49 (supported by only a few scholars).¹²
 - A. Nearly all the prophecies of Jeremiah against foreign nations are based on the utterances of earlier prophets.¹³
 - B. Obadiah could not have borrowed from Jeremiah.
 1. The prophecy of Jeremiah contains items unique to himself and characteristic of his style, but none of these peculiarities are found in Obadiah.¹⁴
 2. Obadiah's order is "more natural and forcible and the more graphic and compact."¹⁵
 3. Jeremiah's "ideas are reversed in sequence, broken off from one another, mingled with other matter, and so deprived of their cumulative and orderly

⁹Delitzsch, according to Keil, 344.

¹⁰Davidson, 265.

¹¹Allen, 133.

¹²Hitzig and Vatke, according to Robinson, 180. See also Appendix.

¹³Keil, 340.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Robinson, 181.

- significance that but one conclusion seems possible, namely, that Jeremiah depended on Obadiah.”¹⁶
- C. If Obadiah is dated early, then Jeremiah’s prophecy against Edom, delivered in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (cf. Jeremiah 46.1 ff., ca. 604 BC), collaborates with this view.
- III. Many scholars have postulated an earlier oracle from which both Obadiah and Jeremiah drew.¹⁷
- A. Jeremiah only uses portions of Obadiah 1-9; therefore, the entirety of the book was unknown to him.
1. “But it is by no means certain that Jeremiah had only vv. 1-9 before him.”¹⁸
 2. “The resemblance between Jeremiah 49.12 and Obadiah 16 can hardly be accidental.”¹⁹
 3. Jeremiah adopted only those verses which described the doom of Edom and not those describing their offense since that wrongdoing lay in the remote past.²⁰
- B. Jeremiah could not have quoted from Obadiah.
1. The passage of Jeremiah 49.14-16, 9 consists of almost perfect elegiac lines, and Obadiah reflects only minutely this rhythmic pattern. Therefore, even though Obadiah probably retains the order of the original oracle, he reproduces less accurately the authentic form of the separate verses and cannot be the original.²¹
 2. A comparison of Obadiah 8 with Jeremiah 49.7 shows the impossibility of either borrowing from the other (cf. Obadiah 7 and the LXX of Jeremiah 49.7).²²
- C. “The difference in the order of the material makes it likely that both Obadiah and Jeremiah are using an earlier oracle against Edom.”²³

¹⁶Ibid.; cf. The parallels given by Pfeiffer, 585: Obadiah 1 = Jeremiah 49.14; 2 = 49.15; 3a = 49.16a; 4 = 49.16b; 5 = 49.9; 6 = 49.10a; 8 = 49.7.

¹⁷Bentzen, 144; Thompson, *IB*, 858; Wade, xxxiv.-xxxvii.

¹⁸Kirkpatrick, 86.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 87.

²¹Wade, xxxvii.

²²Pfeiffer, 585.

²³Thompson, *IB*, 858.

- D. “It is difficult to maintain that Jeremiah 46–49, in its present form existed as early as 604.”²⁴
- IV. It is not impossible that Obadiah and Jeremiah wrote independently of one another.
- A. The proverb common to Obadiah 8 and Jeremiah 49.7 shows literary independence.²⁵
- B. There is no external evidence supporting an earlier oracle.
- C. Perhaps the similarities are “part of the religious language of prophecy, in which when religious truth had once been embodied, the prophets handed it on from one generation to another.”²⁶
- V. Obadiah imitated Joel.
- A. “There is so remarkable a coincidence between vv. 10-18 of Obadiah and ch. ii.32 and ch. iii. of Joel, in a very large number of words, expressions, thoughts, considering the smallness of the two passages, and especially that of Obadiah, that the dependence of one upon the other must be universally acknowledged.”²⁷
- B. “The originality of Joel indeed is generally admitted.”²⁸
1. But originality, the quality of saying something best and with an accent of authority, cannot be equated with priority in time.²⁹
2. Therefore, “the originality of Joel is no disproof of his dependence.”³⁰
- C. Most scholars affirm Joel’s use of Obadiah.
1. “In 2.32 Joel indicates that he is quoting directly from Obadiah 17 by the phrase ‘as the Lord has said.’”³¹
- a. “Joel could only have taken this from Obadiah, for it occurs nowhere else.”³²
- b. Ewald suggested Joel derived this from an earlier oracle that has been lost, but such cannot be proven.³³

²⁴Gray, 214.

²⁵Lewis, 91.

²⁶Pusey, 348.

²⁷Keil, 343; for similarities cites Thompson *IB*, 858.

²⁸Davidson, 265; cf. Pusey, 348.

²⁹Robinson, 37.

³⁰Delitzsch, according to Keil, 344.

³¹Thompson, *IB*, 858.

³²Keil, 344.

³³*Ibid.*

2. The similar expressions are remarkable. These are not chance idioms, nor are they language of imagery. Rather, they are “part of the religious language of prophecy, in which when religious truth had once been embodied, the prophets handed it on from one generation to another.”³⁴
- D. But these arguments are concerned with ideas that are familiar among the prophets who were guided by the Spirit of God, so literary independence is not impossible.
- IV. Amos (ca. 760 BC) also shows some acquaintance with Obadiah.³⁵

Unity

- I. “The writing of Obadiah contains but one single prophecy concerning the relation in which Edom stood to the people of God.”³⁶
 - A. The well-founded form and the natural theological progress of the oracle asserts its unity.³⁷
 1. The book forms a symmetrical whole. “The doom of Edom is naturally followed by the reason for that doom, while the promise of the restoration of Judah forms the natural counterfoil to the fate of Edom, and an appropriate conclusion to the prophecy.”³⁸
 2. “There is a natural development throughout the book: from the forecast of Edom’s downfall to a passionate delineation of its crimes on Judah’s Day, then to the wider theme of the nations’ Day of doom and the rehabilitation of God’s people.”³⁹
 - B. The thought and style of the prophecy form a perfectly compacted whole.⁴⁰ Connective links join the so-called parts of the book.⁴¹
 1. Edom is spoken of as *Esau* (“Esau” in vv. 6, 8, 9, 18, 19, 21; “Edom” in vv. 1, 8).
 2. Esau’s pride is condemned (vv. 3, 12).
 3. The retribution (v. 6) is like for like (vv. 11, 13, 15).

³⁴Pusey, 348.

³⁵Unger, 343.

³⁶Keil, 337.

³⁷Orelli, 157.

³⁸Kirkpatrick, 37.

³⁹Allen, 135.

⁴⁰Farrar, 180.

⁴¹Kirkpatrick, 38.

- C. The brevity of the prophecy has something to say for its unity.⁴²
- II. But more interpreters than not deny the unity of Obadiah, and two current major views prevail.
 - A. “The first, adduced by Wellhausen, attributes to Obadiah vv. 1-14, 15b, and assigns the rest to one or more later hands.”⁴³
 - 1. “It is admittedly certain that vv. 15a plus 16-21 form an independent section which is not connected with what precedes.”⁴⁴
 - a. The sudden transition in verse 15 from judgment of Edom alone to judgment to judgment of all the nations divides the book into two distinct parts.⁴⁵
 - b. “In vv. 15a, 16-21 the literary and religious colouring is different; vv. 1-14 are marked by a certain graphic vigour; vv. 15-21 are diffuse.”⁴⁶
 - 2. But the fundamental idea of a change does not demand more than one author.
 - a. In verse 18 judgment is concluded against Edom and not the nations; therefore, the change is not as great as the critics assume.⁴⁷
 - b. And the fact that the ambassador in verse 1 had the nations in view accords well with the wider scope of judgment in the latter verses.⁴⁸
 - c. Furthermore, the “same liveliness and boldness which distinguishes the first part of the prophecy prevails in the second also.”⁴⁹

⁴²Pusey, 349.

⁴³Allen, 133.

⁴⁴Eissfeldt, 403; cf. Pfeiffer, 584.

⁴⁵Wade, xxxiv.

⁴⁶McFadyen, 224.

⁴⁷Weiser, 248.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Keil, 347.

- (1) “The latter has its *hapax legomena* and its rare words like the former.”⁵⁰
 - (2) Also, no other Old Testament prophetic writing provides an analogy to this type of schismatic arrangement on grounds of style.⁵¹
- B. “The second main position is that of von Orelli, Rudolph, Weiser, Fohrer and Brockington, who deny to Obadiah only the third part of the book, vv. 19-21.”⁵²
1. Rudolph, followed closely by Weiser, distinguishes author of the book from continuity.⁵³
 - a. Both units are attributed to Obadiah, but “in the first part the nations are the agents of Yahweh’s punishment of Edom, in the second victims along with Edom, while Israel is his agent; in the first part Edom is addressed, in the second the Jews.”⁵⁴
 - b. But Rudolph gives both parts the same historical setting (the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC); therefore, by doing so he has no division.
 2. Fohrer splits verses 1-18 into five distinct units but attributes all to Obadiah (1b-4; 5-7; 8-11; 12-14; 15b; 15a, 16-18).⁵⁵ But the saying in verses 19-21, he says, “must be considered a supplement.”⁵⁶
 - a. It “announces the occupation of the Palestinian territory west of the Jordan, with the exception of Judah, by the Israelite and Judean diaspora, together with a military campaign against Edom on the part of those returning.”⁵⁷
 - b. Thus, according to Fohrer, these verses were penned in the post-exilic period.
 3. Kaiser gives this summary statement, “if the different attempts at a solution are examined, it will be seen that the main problem rests in 16-21 or 19-21, and that at least 19-21 are to be regarded as post-exilic.”⁵⁸

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Allen, 133-134.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Fohrer, 439-440.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Kaiser, 259.

- C. In fact, an endless number of attempts to subdivide Obadiah could be cited, but only a few of the prominent variations will be noted here.
 - 1. Pfeiffer gives two basic divisions (1-14; 15b and 15a; 16-21) and further divides each into two subdivisions (1-9, 10-14; 16-18, 19-21).⁵⁹
 - 2. “Sellin finds in 1.2-10 an oracle from the ninth century, in 11-14, 15b a saying from the period after 587 BC, in 15a, 16, 17a, and 21 an announcement of the Day of the Lord from the period about 400 BC, and in 17b, 19, and 20 a yet later announcement of the restoration of Israel.”⁶⁰
 - 3. And Robinson analyzes the book into no less than eight different fragments which he dates between the sixth and fourth centuries BC.⁶¹
- III. But all attempts to discredit the unity of Obadiah cannot be proven.
 - A. No external evidence (i.e., manuscripts) can be cited against authenticity.
 - B. The presuppositions that form the basis for disunity likewise cannot be proven.
 - 1. Similarities do not demand literary dependence.
 - 2. One author does not imply one literary device (e.g., the same author can use both poetry and prose).
 - 3. The guidance of the Spirit of the Lord cannot be dismissed.
 - a. As Archer has stated concerning methodology, “the effort is made on the basis of a very imperfect knowledge of ancient affairs to link up even the vaguest of references to contemporary affairs with the known historical conditions in each succeeding period.”⁶²
 - b. Those who piecemeal Obadiah in such fashion “operate upon the principle that there is no genuine predictive prophecy but only prophecy after the event.”⁶³

⁵⁹Pfeiffer, 584.

⁶⁰Kaiser, 259.

⁶¹Forher, 439-440.

⁶²Archer, 302.

⁶³Ibid.

Date—The difficulties of Obadiah, even the date alone, are in inverse proportion to its size. Only three fundamental positions concerning the date will be explored.

- I. Pre-exilic. The occasion for Obadiah's prophecy was the capture and plundering of Jerusalem by the Philistines and Arabians in the reign of Jehoram, ca. 850 BC, or another similar invasion (cf. 2 Chronicles 21.16, 17; 2 Kings 8.20).⁶⁴
 - A. "Jewish tradition in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin*, 39b) placed Obadiah in the reign of Ahab in the 9th century BC."⁶⁵ Ahab reigned in Israel (874-853 BC) prior to Jehoram's rule in Judah (853-841 BC).
 - B. The position of Obadiah in the collection of the twelve prophets suggests a pre-exilic date (e.g., Obadiah stands among older prophets like Amos, Hosea, and Jonah).⁶⁶ But the order of the twelve in the Hebrew canon is not strictly chronological.
 - C. Obadiah's priority to Joel, Amos, and Jeremiah has provided grounds for establishing a pre-exilic date.
 - D. The language of 2 Chronicles 21.17 agrees perfectly with Obadiah 10-14.⁶⁷
 1. According to 2 Chronicles 21.17, the ravaging hordes of the Philistines and Arabians "forced their way into Jerusalem, plundered the royal palace, and carried away the children and wives of the king."⁶⁸
 2. The Edomites were not the immediate offenders, but simply accomplices (as set forth in Obadiah 11).
 - a. They rejoiced in the doings of the enemy (vv. 11ff).⁶⁹
 - b. They also partook of the evil (v. 13).
 - c. They cut off the way of escape for the Israelites (v. 14).⁷⁰
 3. But the brief account in 2 Chronicles 21.16, 17 makes no reference to the Edomites.⁷¹

⁶⁴Keil, 343f.; cf. Kirkpatrick, 39f.; Orelli, 157f.; Archer, 300f.

⁶⁵Thompson, *NBD*, 903.

⁶⁶Keil, 340.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 345.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰Knopf, 300.

⁷¹Kirkpatrick, 39.

- a. Neither do the historical books mention the part of the Edomites in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans in 587 BC.⁷²
 - b. But “it was natural that just at this time (e.g., 850 BC) they should have joined in the raid with a view to plunder, for they had recently revolted from Judah (2 Kings 8.20ff.).”⁷³
 4. Some who argue for the early date of Obadiah regard vv. 10-14 as predictive.⁷⁴
 - a. But Obadiah threatens because of a past event (“the violence done,” in v. 10). The preterites used by Obadiah (e.g., “strangers carried” and “foreigners entered” in v. 11; “just as you drank” in v. 16) are not to be seen as predictive.
 - b. Furthermore, to attribute Obadiah 11 ff. to the future causes the entire threatening to float in the air, “and so severe an accusation on account of something which might only take place hereafter would seem incongruous.”⁷⁵
- II. Exilic. The majority of commentators see the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC as the occasion for Obadiah’s utterance.
- A. “This is the only capture of Jerusalem in which it is recorded that Edomites participated (Psalm 137.7; Esdras 4.45).”⁷⁶
 1. But there is no hint of total destruction which characterized the sacking of 587.⁷⁷
 - a. However, the phrases “the day of his misfortune” (v. 12), “the day of distress” (v. 12), and “the day of his calamity” (v. 13) seem to indicate no less than this disastrous event.
 - (1) But these cannot denote a day of rejection, nor an utter destruction.⁷⁸
 - (2) “The crowding together of these expressions simply shows that the calamity was a very great one, and not that Jerusalem was destroyed and the kingdom of Judah dissolved.”⁷⁹

⁷²Ibid., 40.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Pusey, 344f.; cf. Caspari and Hengstenberg, according to Keil, 347.

⁷⁵Orelli, 157.

⁷⁶Thompson, *NBD*, 903.

⁷⁷Kirkpatrick, 38.

⁷⁸Keil, 342.

⁷⁹Ibid.

- b. Also, Obadiah must be referring to the episode of 587 since vv. 10-14 so closely parallel the works of other writers who lived after the event and who describe Edom's participation in it (cf. Lamentations 4.21, 22; Ezekial 35.5f.).⁸⁰
 - (1) But the references made by later writers are unambiguous.
 - (2) On the other hand, Obadiah does not specifically state or allude to the destruction of 587.⁸¹
- 2. Neither is there reference to the Chaldeans or to any wholesale deportation of the nation to Babylon.⁸²
 - a. But this may be due to Obadiah's emphasis on the crime and punishment of Edom.⁸³
 - b. And although v. 20 is vague and full of textual corruptions,⁸⁴ a body of captives is nonetheless implied.⁸⁵
 - (1) The basic problem incurred here is that these exiles are not in Babylon.
 - (2) But perhaps these are some of the many inhabitants of Judah who were forced to flee from the oncoming armies of the Babylonians.⁸⁶
- B. The invasion of Jerusalem in the ninth century BC, "to judge from the silence of the Book of Kings, was little more than a predatory incursion, from the effects of which Judah speedily recovered." Therefore, Obadiah displays the thought of a much later age.⁸⁷
 - 1. But the lack of reference in Kings does not necessarily indicate a "predatory incursion."
 - 2. However, the rapid recovery of Israel (Amaziah demolished Edom ca. 790 BC) plus the fact that Edom wronged Israel again and possibly even to a greater degree in 587 BC (if the pre-exilic date is assumed) presents a great difficulty in interpreting vv. 15-21 which propose a final judgment of Edom.

⁸⁰Caspari, according to Keil, 341.

⁸¹Keil, 342.

⁸²Kirkpatrick, 38.

⁸³Farrar, 176.

⁸⁴Watson, 786.

⁸⁵Farrar, 176.

⁸⁶Ibid., 177.

⁸⁷Driver, 320.

- a. Nonetheless, Archer uses this “rapid recovery” as evidence for an early date.⁸⁸
 - (1) A proper translation of v. 13 points to other occasions when Jerusalem may have been attacked by invading foes.⁸⁹
 - (2) And v. 13 would not be appropriate “if Jerusalem were already a desolate heap of ruins as the 585 date would imply.”⁹⁰
 - b. Also, the time span between Edom’s evil and their final judgment is not given specifically by Obadiah.
 - C. A time after the disintegration of the Northern Kingdom is implied, since Samaria has totally disappeared from view.⁹¹
 - 1. But Samaria has not disappeared totally from the oracle (v. 19).
 - 2. Also, since only Judah is the recipient of Edom’s wrongdoing, Obadiah naturally emphasizes Judah over Samaria.
- III. Post-exilic. A third view as to the dating of Obadiah is postulated by Wellhausen, Pfeiffer, and others.
- A. The book appeared “between 587, the fall of Jerusalem, and 312, when the capital of the land of Edom, Petra, was in the hand of the Arabs.”⁹²
 - 1. Obadiah 7 describes an earlier stage of Bedouin assaults, which also is described in Malachi 1.1-5.⁹³
 - a. These assaults occurred somewhere between 600 and 500 BC.
 - b. “Inscriptions found at Tell el-Kheleifeh, the biblical Ezion-geber, show that at about 600 BC, the governor was still an Edomite, but by the fifth century Arab names are found there.”⁹⁴
 - 2. But this analysis disregards the nature of predictive prophecy.
 - a. The Hebrew perfect verbs in vv. 2-9 are to be regarded as prophetic, and the imperfects assume their normal future role.⁹⁵
 - b. Also, v. 10 implies a still future punishment of Edom (“you shall be cut off forever”).

⁸⁸Archer, 300.

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Farrar, 176.

⁹²Bentzen, 143.

⁹³McFadyen, 223.

⁹⁴Thompson, *IB*, 858.

⁹⁵Allen, 130.

- B. Other critics⁹⁶ assign Obadiah to an even later period due to the implications of vv. 19-21. Here again, however, their naturalistic presuppositions are unfounded.

Conclusion - Affirming the unity and possibly, although with much reservation, the literary independence of Obadiah, a date of 840 BC is probable but a date of 585 BC is not impossible.

⁹⁶Hitzig, according to Davidson, 264, dates the book ca. 312 BC.

APPENDIX

Comparison of the Texts: Obadiah 1b-5 and Jeremiah 49.14-16, 9

- 1b We have heard a message from the Lord, and an envoy has been sent among the nations
49.14a I have heard a message from the Lord, and an envoy is sent among the nations
- 1c Rise up, even let us rise up against her for battle
49.14b Gather together and come against her, even rise up for battle
- 2 Behold, I will make you small among the nations, you will be greatly despised
49.15 For behold, I will make you small among the nations, despised among mankind
- 3a The pride of your heart has deceived you
49.16a Your terror has deceived you, and the pride of your heart
- 3b Dwellers in clefts of rock (Hebrew *sela*), the height of his habitation
49.16b Dwellers in clefts of the rock, holders of the height of the hill
- 3c Saying in his heart, who will bring me down to earth
- 4a Though you go high like the eagle, and though you set your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down
49.16c If you make your nest high like the eagle, from there I will bring you down
- 4b Declares Yahweh
49.16d Declares Yahweh
- 5a If thieves come to you, if robbers at night
49.9ab If grape gatherers come to you . . . if thieves at night
- 5b Indeed, you will be ruined, would they not steal their sufficiency
49.9b . . . they would destroy their sufficiency
- 5c If grape gatherers come to you, would they not leave gleanings
49.9a If grape gatherers come to you, would they not leave gleanings

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